Don Karnes - Fairbury's Most Famous Sports Celebrity

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William Henry Karnes was born in 1841 in Kentucky. He married Sarah "Sally" Dixon from County Mayo, Ireland. In about 1870, they moved their family with seven children to Fairbury.

William Karnes was appointed a Fairbury village constable. While he was intoxicated in 1874, he became engaged in an altercation with John McKay. Karnes cut him in the abdomen, and he later died from this wound. A trial was held at the Livingston County courthouse in Pontiac. The jury returned a verdict of guilty of manslaughter, and the prison sentence was ten years. He later became the janitor of the South Side school. When that school caught fire in 1896, William died trying to help the firemen put out the fire. He was buried at Graceland.

One of William Karnes' sons was Thomas Dixon Karnes. In 1894, he married Nettie M. Lough at Milwaukee, Wisconsin. One of their children Thomas Don Karnes was born in Fairbury in 1902.

Thomas Dixon Karnes was a well respected Fairbury businessman. He was the manager of the Farmers Grain Company for thirty-three years. When the Great Depression started in 1929, investors across the country lost confidence in the banks. In June of 1930, the largest bank in Fairbury, the Fairbury Bank, closed its doors. Depositors eventually received 51% of their money back. For the rest of 1930, Fairbury only had one bank operating, the Farmer's State Bank of Fairbury.

In 1931, Thomas Dixon Karnes re-opened the closed Fairbury Bank and renamed it the Fairbury State Bank. He served as President of this bank. He died in 1945.

Thomas Don Karnes grew up on south Third Street, just a couple houses north of the fairgrounds. He attended Fairbury schools. Don was a star athlete at Fairbury Township High School. He lettered on the undefeated football team of 1917 and captained the 1919 team. The 1918 season was canceled because of the influenza epidemic during World War I. After high school graduation, he worked one year on the railroad to earn money for college. Karnes enrolled at the University of Illinois at Urbana in the fall of 1921 and graduated in June of 1925.

Red Grange was born in 1903, so he was just one year younger than Don Karnes. Red Grange was arguably the best football player to ever play for the University of Illinois football team. In his biggest college game, Red Grange scored five touchdowns against the arch-rival Michigan team. Red went on to play for the Chicago Bears and helped to start the National Football League. Don Karnes played on the same football team with

Red Grange at the University of Illinois. He suffered a knee injury which ended his football career.

Don Karnes made the University of Illinois varsity basketball team as a sophomore for the 1922-23 season. He played the forward position. The record for the 1922-23 squad was nine wins and six losses over-all. Their Big Ten conference record was seven wins and five losses.

The 1923-24 season was the best for Don Karnes and the Fighting Illini basketball team. Their record was eleven wins and six losses overall. Their conference record was eight wins and four losses. They shared the Big 10 conference title with Wisconsin and Chicago. All three teams had identical conference results with eight wins and four losses. Karnes lettered in basketball at the University of Illinois.

After graduating from the University of Illinois and lettering in basketball, Don Karnes accepted the job of head football coach at Illinois State Normal University in Normal, Illinois. He was the youngest man to act as a head coach for a major college. He served as the head football coach for two seasons, from 1925 to 1926, and compiled a record of five wins and ten losses. Karnes was also the head basketball coach at Illinois State from 1925 to 1927. His basketball team record was nine wins and twenty losses.

Don Karnes resigned from his ISU coaching positions in early 1927. He decided to enter the insurance field in Bloomington with William M. Anderson. He worked in the insurance field until he retired in 1969. Karnes became the football coach at St. Mary's high school. He also coached at Trinity high school and Wesleyan college. In about 1931, Karnes married Leta Maxine Stucker. Don met her while he was at the University of Illinois. Don and Leta had no children and divorced sometime after 1946.

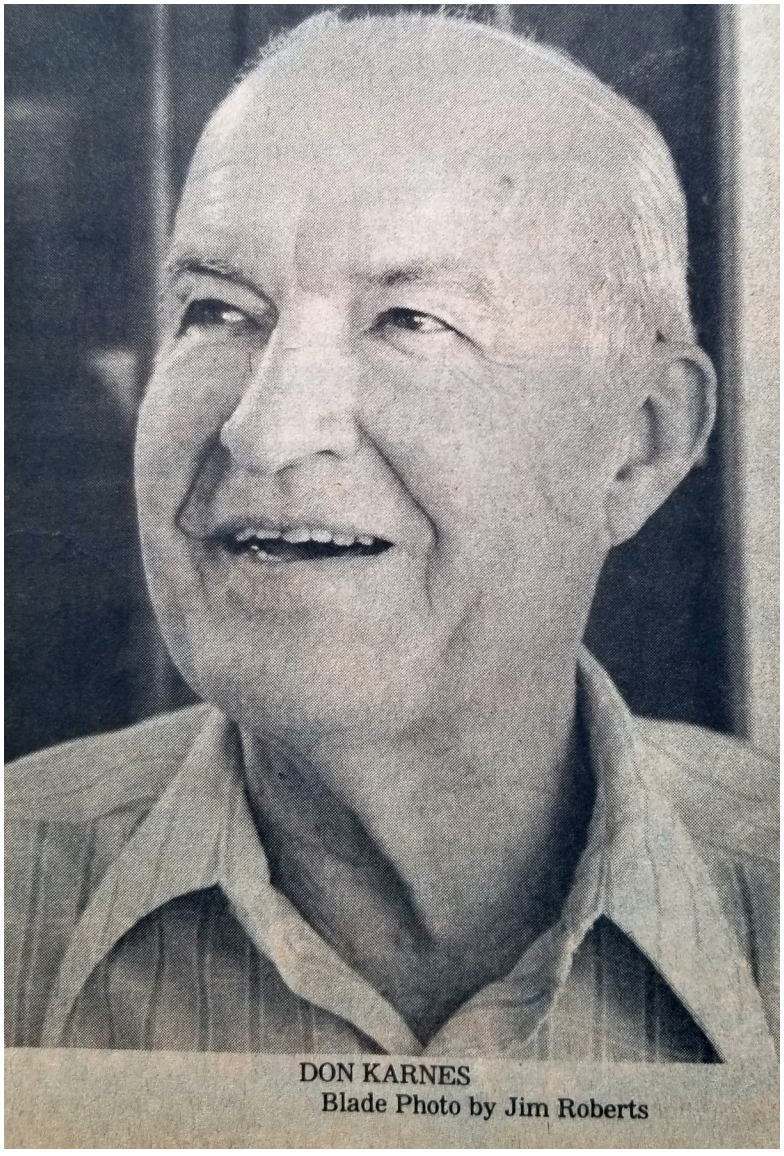
In 1942, Don Karnes enlisted in the Naval Reserve as a Lieutenant. He was eventually placed in charge of all service schools at the Great Lakes naval training station. He was released from the service after the war as a Lieutenant Commander. After the war, Don returned to the insurance industry. In 1949, he resumed working for the State of Illinois insurance examiners office. He was promoted to Chief Examiner before retiring in 1969.

While working as the Chief Examiner, he returned to his Chicago apartment one night to find it full of Chicago police officers. They arrested him on a variety of narcotics charges. Don's friend, Bob Weidrich, a Chicago police reporter, helped prove that Don was "set-up" on the drug charges. The narcotics charges were dropped. The set-up effort was traced to a firm where Karnes had uncovered violations of state insurance department regulations.

After retirement, Karnes continued to be interested in athletics. He traveled to every Olympic Games after World War II, except the 1980 games in Russia, which were boycotted. Don was a tireless spectator at Fairbury high school sports events. He helped several Fairbury students get into college. He also had a basketball court built at one of his Fairbury homes south of the Fairbury Hospital, so the local kids had a place to play

basketball. Karnes donated several items to the Fairbury Echoes Museum. One of these donations was an extremely rare 1872 five-dollar bill issued by the First National Bank of Fairbury.

Upon his death in 1982, Karnes established a scholarship fund for Fairbury high school students. Each year, scholarships are awarded to local students. Karnes is remembered as one of Fairbury's sports celebrities who was also very generous to his hometown students.



DON KARNES
Blade Photo by Jim Roberts